

Marion Lerner: *Landnahme-Mythos, kulturelles Gedächtnis und nationale Identität. Isländische Reisevereine im frühen 20. Jahrhundert.* Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag 2010, 390 S.

In this book Marion Lerner investigates the symbolic and physical recolonization of the Icelandic landscape by three national travel associations: *Ferðafélag Íslands* (Icelandic Touring Association), *Bandalag íslenskra farfugla* (International Youth Hostel Federation) and *Fjallamenn* (Mountaineers).

As the title indicates Lerner focuses on processes in the early 20th century where Icelandic society was undergoing substantial changes due to increased urbanization and industrialization. The comparative analyses of the material, mostly texts, is carried out on a solid foundation of theories from the field of cultural memory studies, theories of nationalism and collective identity, literary studies, cultural geography, theories of European aesthetic and theology.

The goal of the book is to investigate the linkage between cultural memory and the image of the land created in travel literature. The book can be placed in a tradition of studies of nationalism but it is also related to recent studies of similar travel

associations and the 20<sup>th</sup> century cult of the homeland in Scandinavia and Northern Europe.

The analyses begins with an introductory chapter about the cultural and historical preconditions including myths of origin and settlement. Subsequently an outline of theories of nationalism and collective identity follows where both generalized theories by Bernhard Giesen and Benedict Anderson and specific Icelandic studies by Jón Karl Helgason, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Jón J. Aðils are included.

The following chapters consist of analyses of the extensive source material from the archives of the travel associations, which is discussed in a continuous dialogue with its political and ideological context. The importance of these physical archives as well as the intangible cultural reservoirs of cultural remembrance is made clear especially through the fruitful syntheses of the concluding chapters. Lerner uses, amongst others, the theories of Jan and Aleida Assmann to point out

an important dynamic between the latent potential of cultural canon and the references that are actually used in the period and sources examined. This is done to clarify the different ideological or cultural agenda of the travel associations. In these chapters Lerner accounts for the development and activities of the travel associations as well as for many of their written and visual sources.

One of the central focuses in the analyses of the relationship between the sources from the travel associations and Icelandic cultural and literary history is the image of *landnám* (settlement) – a cultural myth that synthesizes movement and domestication. Lerner demonstrates how this is interconnected with the literary canon, which is used as intertextual references in many travel descriptions as a means to replenish the sites of the highlands with cultural meaning.

She points to this as a strategy, which enforces what Giesen calls the boundaries of the *Innen* and *Außen* (inside and outside) of the national community since most references require a thorough knowledge of Icelandic culture. Lerner outlines the differences in the attitudes to nature, that are expressed in the extensive material from the three associations and thereby she illustrates that there have been different instrumentalizations of the *landnám* myth.

By the fundamental distinction between space and place Lerner can unfold the cultural meaning of certain patterns of movement and interaction with nature (space) and the layers of cultural meaning on specific sites (place).

Both *Ferðafélag Íslands* and *Fjallamenn* had a scientific and exploratory approach to the land in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as a focus on popular education. The *Farfugla* movement is described as having valued subjective descriptions of common experiences and resumption of myth telling. They come to represent a romantic attitude towards the national remembrance inscribed in the landscape through myths, tales and legends. In this way the analyses of the travel writings illustrate how travelling through the land as well as textual accounts of the landscape secure cultural remembrance.

Even though the main focus is on the travel associations Lerner draws up interesting perspectives to related cultural phenomena that help a general understanding of Icelandic modernity and nationalism. These perspectives include amongst others the 1930 celebration of the anniversary of the parliament, the expansion of infrastructure, landscape painting and handicrafts, the *Fjölnir* journal, the connotations of farming and fishing and cartography.

The book is a revised version of Lerner's doctoral thesis from 2008 and the form is an elegant mixture of description, a thorough focus on the many sources, and a consideration of theoretical discussions of modern conceptions of nature and the notion of the sublime. It reflects an impressive archival investigation and is an important contribution to research on recent Icelandic cultural history. With its focus on literary establishments of continuity between country, nation and language the book contributes substantially to the study of the role of travel literature as well as to the study of Icelandic modernity in general and will be of interest to numerous scholars in these fields.

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